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AUTHOR Robinson, Nancy M.; Weimer, Linda J.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses research on early entrance to public school and individual decisions regarding early entrance. The discussion of research findings briefly alludes to four areas of research relevant to the early admission of children to kindergarten and first grade. These areas of research concern: (1) attitudes of school personnel; (2) comparison of the achievement and school problems of "unselected" children who are young for their grade with the achievement and school problems of their classmates; (3) children carefully selected for early entry; and (4) the predictive validity of measures of early intellectual development and academic advancement. Discussion then addresses aspects of Washington State legislation that establishes conditions for the early school enrollment of children as young as 4 years, 9 months. These conditions involve system-relevant and family-relevant issues, the status of the child's skills and abilities, and the availability of other options. Equity issues are briefly considered. Concluding discussion addresses the issue of living with judgment calls and compromises. Two tables list titles of preferred and alternative kindergarten and first-grade screening tests and issues and guidelines to be considered by those who make decisions about individual instances of early entry. (RH)

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EARLY ADMISSION TO KINDERGARTEN AND FIRST GRADE
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Issues of the Academic Acceleration of Gifted Children.
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Nancy M. Robinson and Linda J. Weimer
University of Washington Center for the Study of Capable Youth
University of Washington NI-20, Seattle, WA 98195

All children, bright or otherwise, learn best when they are appropriately challenged. Achieving that optimal match between child and challenge is, however, a challenge of its own. For a bright child within 6 months of ordinary school entry age, one of the easiest, least disruptive, and least expensive options for matching ability and interests is early entry to school.

School personnel tend to hold strong convictions in favor of a firmly defined age-grading system. Yet, geographically speaking, school entry age is matter of little agreement. Across the nations, the United States is toward the early end of a rather wide range and, within the United States, cut-off dates vary from July 1 (MO) to January 1 (DE, CT). During the last three decades, typical cutoff dates have been moved from the beginning of the calendar year to the beginning of the school year. During the same period, preschool attendance has skyrocketed as have other initiatives such as Sesame Street, with the result that today's young children are pretty knowledgeable, and public school curricula have escalated accordingly.

In recent years, we have seen the emergence of another new phenomenon, divergent pressures on the system by families in differing social class positions. Near-poor families without access to free day care are anxious for their children to enter public school, while families intent on raising high achievers (or eventual football stars) are "redshirting" their children, especially their boys. Added to the mix are increasing numbers of children surviving premature births whose birthdates make them eligible as much as three months early. The outcome is a widening range of ages and abilities in the classroom, with at-risk children entering younger and no-risk children entering older. As a result, very bright children who enter school eagerly, already advanced in skills and knowledge, may be least well served there.

Within this context, the issues for highly able children become increasingly complex. Many states and districts have, in response, officially opted out of offering early entry. For those that do permit it, however, professionals and families need to proceed carefully, considering local conditions as well as the child's own development. This paper can allude only briefly to four bodies of research relevant to the questions involved. (Supporting references are found in Robinson & Weimer, in press.)

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RESEARCH FINDINGS

The first area constitutes investigations of attitudes of school personnel. Teachers and administrators are, by and large, opposed to the practise of early entry, though experience with the practise may soften things somewhat. Children do not deserve to be tossed to lions, although some lions are fiercer and more intractable than others.

The second area of research is, in fact, quite irrelevant, but naively regarded by many as arguing against early entry. Studies abound which compare the achievement and school problems of unselected young-for-grade children with their classmates. Although the effect is usually small and found to diminish over time, young-for-grade children tend to exhibit more problems than the group as a whole. The one relevant piece of information here is that young-for-grade children are less often nominated for special programs designed for academically gifted children, a finding that may have more to do with the nomination process than the children's suitability.

The third area of research, with children carefully selected for early entry, produces much more optimistic expectations. A number of reviews of the literature have concluded that selected early entrants tend to equal or surpass their classmates in achievement and to equal them in adjustment, although some find hints of mild adjustment problems at the very beginning. Especially reassuring are the several studies of early entrants who have reached junior and senior high schools; the picture here is of academic advantage, participation in extracurricular activities, and positive self-concepts. Those few investigators who have found negative effects have tended to be that minority with too-liberal entry requirements, such as an IQ of only 115 or an MA of only 5-0.

To be sure, only a few studies have compared early entrants with non-accelerated children matched for ability, and no one has ever done (or probably ever will do) a random-assignment study. Most investigators studying roughly matched samples have found evidence of advantage for early entrants in achievement and social-emotional adjustment.

Another body of work deals with the predictive validity of early measures of intellectual development and academic advancement. Here, the evidence is somewhat cautionary. For groups of children tested first at age 4 and again later, there are substantial but diminishing IQ correlations over time (typically about .8 between ages 4 and 6, about .6 between age 4 and adolescence), with some individuals changing rather dramatically. Precocious early reading skills do tend to presage later advancement in reading, though the degree tends to diminish over time and many bright children become advanced readers after a non-precocious start. As a matter of fact, these longitudinal

findings do make us a bit of a conservative and argue for leaving a good margin for error.

A few longitudinal studies have yielded hints about the direction of changes in developmental rate to be expected for an individual child. Though there are no strong predictors, a child who is active and curious, who exhibits personal maturity, and whose family is both bright and responsive, is more likely to maintain or gain in rate of development than one not so favored.

INDIVIDUAL DECISIONS

In the State of Washington, we have a rather peculiar law with both advantages and disadvantages. School districts may, if they so opt, enroll children as young as 4 years, 9 months, but those children must demonstrate maturity of 5 years, 6 months in each of six areas: mental ability, visual discrimination, auditory discrimination, fine motor skills, gross motor skills, and social/emotional development. A child who is reading is deemed to have above-average visual and auditory discrimination. There is a lot wrong with this law -- measures in some areas are not well standardized, there is no recognition of academic skills, nor any compensatory balancing of age-appropriate skills in one area with high skills in another -- but the general idea is a sensible one designed to assure maturity levels comparable to those of classmates. Detailed individual assessment is required, thus avoiding a catastrophe like that reported yesterday by the group of investigators from Virginia.

Table 1 lists a number of psychometric measures which, in our clinical experience, are at least reasonably well standardized and suitable for testing relevant abilities and skills in this age group. For individual children, a wide variety of issues need to be taken into account, some having to do with the child and some the educational context. Table 2 lists a number of relevant questions. They include:

System-relevant issues

1. Legal standards and common practises of the school system (What are the legal parameters? How early is allowable? What are customs of early entry, grade skipping, redshirting?) Will this child be the only one who is young?
2. Local versus national test norms. (What is the nature of the school population? Easy to be misled by national norms, particularly in states with early cut-offs. Early skills make flying leaps.)
3. Openness and flexibility of the school system to problem-solving.

Family-relevant issues

1. Family stresses which may deplete child's energies
2. Family expectations (Do they need the highest achieving child on the block? Do they appreciate the challenge the child will face, or are they seeking status?)
3. Family involvement, support, and personal resources

Status of Skills and Abilities

In general, it is wise to require development to equal at least the mean of the actual class the child will enter, with some judgment about the degree to which advancement in one or more areas balances age-appropriate development in another. Development below age level in any of these areas tends to cast doubt on the wisdom of early entrance.

1. Cognitive abilities
 - A. General ability, or IQ
 - B. Specific abilities (verbal and quantitative reasoning and memory probably deserve more weight than visual-spatial reasoning)
2. Academic skills (reading and arithmetic)
 - A. Readiness and attained skills
 - B. Interest levels in these areas
 - C. General language competence, vocabulary
 - D. Absence of suspected learning disability (phonological awareness, perception of letter orientation, auditory discrimination, auditory short-term memory, etc.)

(Child not yet reading will still have an interesting curriculum ahead; the child reading at 5th grade level will be bored in first grade no matter when he/she arrives there)
3. Classroom learning skills
 - A. Listening, basic vocabulary, remembering and following directions, attending for at least 10-15 minutes without redirection
 - B. Group membership skills; sharing teacher's attention, turntaking; sensing direction of discussion
 - C. Wiggle factor
4. Motor development
 - A. Fine motor skills
 - B. Visual motor skills, eye-hand
 - C. Gross motor skills (perhaps least important)
5. Social-emotional maturity issues
 - A. Self-help (middle-class families tend to limit)
 - B. Emotional maturity: attention span, delay of gratification, impulsivity, frustration tolerance, task orientation, emotional lability, expression of aggression)
 - C. Friendships (evaluate in light of common interests and communication styles as well as concept of friendship)
 - D. Temperament and mood (lifestyle vs. adjustment)

Availability of Other Options

1. Current options other than early entry
2. Options available later (gifted programs, ungraded or combined grades, cross-grade grouping [Joplin plan], private school in which a grade could be repeated, skipping later grade)

Equity Issues

As you can see, this adds up to a rather cautionary approach. We are advocating here a very careful look at a variety of issues, and a rather generous margin of safety to hedge against the unpredictable vagaries of developmental rates at later ages. The process of decision-making in an area of such import for a child's entire future should not be taken lightly. Even with all this information in hand, families, schools, and assessors will not find the process easy.

As a consequence, however, professional time and involvement are expensive. There may be short-cuts and screening steps appropriate to the process, but however you slice it, it will be labor-intensive. The expenses may be too great for school systems to provide to all early applicants.

So here we run into an issue of equity that we cannot easily resolve. If school systems provide these services, they are likely to be hurried, incomplete, and arbitrary, as our colleagues from Virginia have attested. If parents must pay for the services, then only those with the fiscal resources will become eligible. We really do not know how best to resolve this issue, but we are confident that, with good will, a way to proceed can be found.

Living with Judgment Calls and Compromises

Finally, a word about living with decisions. There simply is no perfect world for the child who is different. Some solutions involve tolerating differences in calendar age, some involve tolerating differences in mental age, and some that match both of these create differences in ethnic/social mix that are undesirable. Moreover, bright children do not come in any neater packages than do other children, and the young child whose development is uneven will be difficult to place in an optimal setting so long as our elementary schools operate within an age-graded, self-contained classroom system. (We recognize the nurturant value of self-contained classes for young children on other grounds.)

What this implies is that compromises are required, and that both adults and children need to recognize them for what they are and learn to live with them. The best compromise solution for one child, or one family, may not be the same as that for another. Within broad bounds, however, families and schools need to acquire openness to a wide variety of options, and to live with imperfect solutions. We believe that the evidence shows that early entrance to kindergarten or first grade, carefully considered, presents one viable option for bright children which minimizes many of the disadvantages of other options though it is not entirely free of risk itself. Such is the real world.

References to be found in: Robinson, N.M. & Weimer, L.J. (in press). Selection of candidates for early admission to kindergarten and first grade. In W.T. Southern & E.D. Jones (Eds.). Academic acceleration of gifted children. NY: Teachers College.

Table 1

KINDERGARTEN AND FIRST GRADE SCREENING BATTERY

Preferred tests are capitalized; alternatives are also listed in some cases.

MENTAL ABILITY

WECHSLER PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCALE OF INTELLIGENCE, REVISED
(WPPSI-R) (or)
STANFORD-BINET, FOURTH EDITION

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

PEABODY INDIVIDUAL ACHIEVEMENT TEST - REVISED (or)
WOODCOCK-JOHNSON PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL BATTERY, REVISED
TESTS OF ACHIEVEMENT
Wide Range Achievement Test - Revised

VISUAL DISCRIMINATION

PEABODY INDIVIDUAL ACHIEVEMENT TEST, REVISED
READING RECOGNITION (for children not reading well,
additional visual discrimination measure is needed)
Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery, Revised,
Visual Discrimination subscale (if needed)
MOTOR-FREE VISUAL DISCRIMINATION TEST

AUDITORY DISCRIMINATION

(ordinarily will not be needed for children reading well)
WPPSI-R MEMORY FOR SENTENCES (this does involve memory load)
TEST OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT-2 PRIMARY, WORD DISCRIMINATION
Wepman Auditory Discrimination Test
Goldman-Fristoe Auditory Discrimination Test

FINE MOTOR SKILLS

WPPSI-R GEOMETRIC DESIGNS
Peabody Developmental Motor Scale (if detailed assessment
needed)
Developmental Test of Visual Motor Integration (Beery)
(May be supplemented, as above, by Vineland Motor Scale)

GROSS MOTOR SKILLS

MCCARTHY SCALES OF CHILDREN'S ABILITIES, MOTOR SCALE
Peabody Developmental Motor Scale
Revised Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale, Motor
subscale (kindergartners only)

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL MATURITY

REVISED VINELAND ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOR SCALE (Socialization,
Daily Living Skills)

Table 2

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER IN INDIVIDUAL DECISIONS ABOUT EARLY ENTRY

System-relevant issues

1. Legal standards and common practises of the school system
2. Local versus national test norms and levels of competence
3. Openness and flexibility of the school system

Family-relevant issues

1. Family stresses
2. Family expectations and cultural background
3. Family involvement, support, and personal resources

Status of Skills and Abilities (Wise to require overall development to equal at least the mean of the actual class the child will enter, though great strength in one or more areas may offset age-appropriate development in others)

1. Cognitive abilities (general and specific, with somewhat more weight to verbal and quantitative reasoning than visual-spatial reasoning)
2. Academic skills (reading, printing, and arithmetic) (readiness and attained skills; interest levels in substantive areas; language competence; absence of suspected learning disability)
3. Classroom learning skills (e.g., attending, following instructions, group membership skills, wiggle factor)
4. Motor development (fine and gross motor, visual-motor)
5. Social-emotional maturity issues (self help, attention span, delay of gratification, frustration tolerance, lability, temperament and mood)
6. Friendship skills (recognize that the bright child may have had few friends who share interests, vocabulary)

Availability of Other Options (current and future)

1. Current alternatives and implied quality of life (e.g., what will another year of preschool do to this child?)
2. Later alternatives (gifted programs, combined grades, cross-grade grouping [Joplin plan], grade skipping possibilities, even options for repeating a grade elsewhere)

Living with Judgment Calls and Compromises

1. Recognize family priorities and tolerance for imperfection
2. Lack of perfection does not mean plan has failed)
3. There is no free lunch and no perfect world for the child who is "different"